DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 068 CS 507 673

AUTHOR Vivian, Barbara G.
TITLE "Stagecoach": A Vehicle for Observation and Analysis of Small-Group Communication.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central States Communication Association (Chicago, IL, April 11-14, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Films; *Group Behavior; *Group Dynamics; Higher Education; *Speech Communication; *Theory Practice Relationship; Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Small Group Communication; Speech Communication Education; *Stagecoach (Film)

ABSTRACT

The film "Stagecoach," a 1939 Western epic, was used in a 200-level small-group communication course as an instructional resource to illustrate the emergence of group norms and roles, the treatment of deviance and conflict, and the influence of external threats, interdependent goals, and shared history on the development of cohesiveness within a group. "Stagecoach" is particularly suitable for observing and analyzing small-group communication since it tells the story of nine travelers forced into close proximity for their stagecoach journey. The movie assignment occurred at mid-term to reinforce concepts already introduced, make connections to communicative behaviors in the student group, and introduce concepts that would be covered in more depth later in the semester. While students watched the film, they were given questions to consider as they observed small-group interaction. Their answers demonstrated that the film served as a linking medium for the students between theory and practice. Students' comments following the assignment indicated that the film was useful as an educational tool to help them visualize communication as a process, and to provide an additional avenue to learning. (PRA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED340068

Stagecoach: A Vehicle for Observation and Analysis of Small-Group Communication

Barbara G. Vivian

Department of Interpersonal Communication

Bowling Green State University

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Barbara Vivian

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

CS507673

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Running Head: STAGECOACH

Abstract

This paper describes the use of Stagecoach, a 1939 Western epic, in a 200-level small-group communication course. The film illustrates the emergence of group norms and roles, the treatment of deviance and conflict, and the influence of external threats, interdependent goals, and shared history on the development of cohesiveness within a group. Student comments indicate that film can be used as an educational tool to illustrate the link between theory and practice, to help students visualize communication as process, and to provide an additional avenue to learning.

Stagecoach: A Vehicle for Observation and Analysis of Small-Group Communication

As communication instructors face the many challenges of college teaching, they may ask: 1) how can we help students see the connection between theory and practice? 2) how can we effectively portray communication as process? and 3) how can we present information that is comprehensible in a class comprised of students with divergent cognitive/learning styles? One technique for addressing these challenges is to use film in the speech-communication classroom. This paper describes how Stagecoach was used in teaching a 200-level small-group communication course and discusses film as an instructional resource that can address the three aforementioned concerns.

Stagecoach is a 1939 "golden oldie" that ushered in a 30-year era of popularity for adult Westerns and gave John Wayne his first important role. Although the movie is over 50 years old, classic films can reflect timeless concepts simply and directly without the distractions of complicated plots, characters, or sets.

Stagecoach is particularly suitable for observing and analyzing small-group communication. Nine travelers, forced into close proximity for their journey, initially form coalitions. "Groupness" (Brilhart, 1978) begins to emerge with increased self-disclosure and the development of interpersonal trust. Cohesiveness increases as the stagecoach riders develop a shared

history, encounter external threats, promote acceptance of group members, and realize their interdependent goals (Fisher & Ellis, 1990). The film also illustrates the emergence of norms and roles, the treatment of deviance and conflict within a group, functional leadership, and changes in self-concept as a result of social comparison (Festinger, 1954).

The movie assignment was made mid-point in the term when students had covered approximately half the course material in readings, lectures, class discussion, and exercises. In addition, they had been involved in group decision-making within assigned groups for nearly five weeks. The timing of this assignment was deliberate: the movie could be used to illustrate or reinforce concepts already introduced, to make relevant connections to communicative behaviors in the student groups, and to introduce concepts that would be covered in more depth later in the semester.

To avoid fragmenting the film by showing it in segments over two or three class periods, we negotiated a separate showing during a two-hour block of time that was convenient for the majority. In addition, the film was placed on library reserve for students who had conflicts or wished to view the film a second time. An atmosphere of "fun" was encouraged by bringing students from two course sections together for the viewing and allowing snacks; an attitude of scholarship was maintained by giving students questions to consider as they observed small-group interaction in Stagecoach. Following the movie, an entire class period was devoted to

discussing student answers, which were also typed and turned in at the end of class. Students were then asked for their anonymous, written reactions to the assignment. Their comments are an important part of the discussion that follows.

As stated earlier, college instructors are faced with the challenge of helping students form linkages, to see how theory is connected to practice, to see understand how course content can be applied to their own lives. Film can serve as a linking medium. Most students accept film as an artistic representation of real society. Shields and Kidd (1973), describing the use of The Poseidon Adventure in teaching group process, explain: "Both theory and art reflect the culture they describe. Speech-communication theory attempts to explain communication in society, and film attempts artistically to reproduce communication on the screen" (p. 201).

Student comments following the assignment indicate that some connections between theory and practice were made. "Watching Stagecoach made me realize how common small groups are in society," wrote one student. "They developed their norms and roles just as we are doing in our small group!" said another. A third student wrote, "This assignment allows us to take the knowledge learned from the book and lectures and apply it to a given situation. It is more of a learning experience when a student is challenged to apply what he/she has learned in class."

Berlo described communication as process as early as 1960. In 1972, Smith wrote: "For more than a decade now many of us have stood before our students and declared with the fervor of conviction in our voices 'Communication is a process'" (p. 174). Just how is the processual nature of small-group communication conveyed to one's students? Working on a group project, adopting the role of participant-observer, and describing the evolution of the group over an extended period of time is an effective method for many. In a film, however, process can be seen in fast-forward. As one student commented, "It was good to actually see a group from beginning to end in a short period of time." "We can actually see small-group communication in the works better than being an actual member of a group," said another. Other comments were: "As we saw the small group form from beginning to end we noted many changes in the characters and relationships within the group" and "I could actually see interpersonal relationships and trust forming."

There is ample evidence that individuals differ in their abilities, motivations, and cognitive styles, and these differences have important consequences for the ways in which individuals learn and perform (Messick, 1976). Consequently, instructional methods are differentially effective for different learners with "flexibility and variability of approaches . . . more likely to be effective than a single method" (McKeachie, 1986, p. 239).

The use of film in the speech-communication classroom adds one more method to the instructor's repertoire and increases the probability that more students will learn. This point was epitomized in the following student comments: "Up until now nothing made sense. This is the best thing that's happened to make it all come together. It has helped me to understand the concepts much better than any reading or lecture" and "I think it was a good idea to see the film because I could actually see how group members reacted toward each other, how they handled conflict, and how they achieved groupness. It was good to see this instead of just reading about it." A few students said that having items to look for as they watched the film helped them focus on specific concepts; several said class discussion following the film was the most beneficial aspect of the assignment.

Using film analysis as an instructional method in the speech-communication course has other benefits as well. Movies are entertaining: a film can add interest and variety to the traditional fare instructors offer their students. Using multiple methods of instruction also helps reinforce learning. "When you can observe the communication terms we learned in class, it is easier to get a handle on them," wrote one student. "It is helping me actually learn the material rather than just memorize it," said another.

I have used Stagecoach in four sections of the small-group communication course and asked for open-ended, anonymous reactions in each. Overall, student responses to the assignment have been positive. Two criticisms, however, should be acknowledged.

First, some students have said there are "too many characters to keep track of" in Stagecoach, especially when trying to identify various roles played within the group. This problem can be remedied by stopping the film and reviewing the characters as they are introduced in the movie; an instructor can also ask students to focus on just a few characters rather than trying to analyze the communicative behaviors of all.

A second criticism involves relevance. "I feel I would get more out of it if it were pertinent to our society today" and "I could identify better with a more recent film" were two student comments. I have addressed this latter concern by showing a more recent film later in the semester. Some students, however, echo my thoughts in selecting a 50-year-old classic to illustrate the small-group process. "It focused on the group and barely anything else. It was easy to pick out significant things happening in the group," said one. "We weren't distracted at all by special effects or even color--so the communication was easily picked up," wrote another.

The use of movies as an instructional resource can add interest, variety, and insight to a speech-communication course. Film, as an art form reflecting reality, can illustrate the link between theory and practice, help

students visualize communication as process, and provide an additional avenue to learning. Stagecoach is one film that can be used effectively in the small-group communication course.

References

Berlo, D. (1960). The process of communication. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

Brilhart, J. K. (1978). Effective group discussion (3rd. Ed.). Dubuque, IA: Brown.

Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. Human Relations, 7, 117-140.

Fisher, B. A., & Ellis, D. G. (1990). Small group decision making: Communication and the group process (3rd. Ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.

McKeachie, W. J. (1986). Teaching tips: A guidebook for the beginning college teacher. Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company.

Messick & Associates (1976). Individuality in learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Shields, D. C., & Kidd, W. C. (1973). Teaching through popular film: A small group analysis of The Poseidan Adventure. Speech Teacher, 22, 201-207.

Smith, D. H. (1972). Communication research and the idea of process. Speech Monographs, 39, 174-182.